DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 467 383 SO 034 086

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TITLE	Teaching Historical Thinking. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education, Bloomington, IN.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO	EDO-SO-2002-6
PUB DATE	2002-08-00
NOTE	4p.
CONTRACT	ED-99-CO-0016
AVAILABLE FROM	ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education, 2805 East Tenth Street, Suite 120, Bloomington, IN, 47408. Tel: 800-266-3815 (Toll Free); Fax: 812-855-0455; e-mail: ericso@indiana.edu; Web site: http://ericso.indiana.edu/ .
PUB TYPE	ERIC Publications (071) -- ERIC Digests in Full Text (073)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Classroom Techniques; *Cognitive Processes; *Historiography; *History Instruction; Secondary Education; Teacher Role
IDENTIFIERS	*Domain Knowledge; Domain Specific Thinking; ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

Cognitive studies researcher, Samuel Wineburg, has conducted empirical studies over the past decade to compare the way historians think about primary and secondary sources with the thinking processes of high school students and teachers. Wineburg's research demonstrates the importance of domain-based or subject-specific thinking in the teaching and learning of history. This digest addresses Wineburg's conception of historical thinking and its application to the teaching and learning of history in schools. It discusses: (1) Wineburg's sourcing heuristic and corroboration heuristic in historical thinking; (2) Wineburg's findings on historical thinking and domain-specific knowledge; (3) applications of historical thinking to reading and interpreting documents; and (4) Internet resources for teachers of historical thinking. (BT)

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EDO-SO-2002-6 August 2002

Teaching Historical Thinking

By Frederick D. Drake

Over the past decade, cognitive studies researcher Samuel Wineburg has conducted empirical studies to compare the way historians think about primary and secondary sources with the thinking processes of high school students and teachers. Wineburg discusses his research in a recently published (2001) book about historical thinking, which is the main source for this Digest. Wineburg's research demonstrates the importance of domain-based or subject-specific thinking in the teaching and learning of history. This Digest addresses Wineburg's conception of historical thinking and its application to the teaching and learning of history in schools. The Digest discusses (1) Wineburg's "sourcing heuristic" and "corroboration heuristic" in historical thinking, (2) Wineburg's findings on historical thinking and domain-specific knowledge, (3) applications of historical thinking to reading and interpreting documents, and (4) Internet-resources for teachers of historical thinking.

The "Sourcing Heuristic" and "Corroboration Heuristic." Wineburg uses two key concepts —the "sourcing heuristic" and the "corroboration heuristic"—to explain how historians think as they read documents. When historians examine primary sources, they engage in the sourcing heuristic by asking questions about an author's credentials, motivations, and participation in events at the time a document was written and the audience for whom the document was intended. Historians contextualize the content of a document, which enables them to appreciate ways of perceiving and thinking that are quite different from conventional ways of perceiving and thinking today. When teachers and students use the sourcing heuristic, they can create a distance between their own views and those of the people of earlier eras.

Historians also use the corroboration heuristic to compare information learned from several documents. Historians make inter-text links while reading documents, noting corroboration among primary sources as well as among historians' interpretations.

Wineburg's research demonstrates that some high school students who scored high on the SAT did not consistently employ the sourcing heuristic and the corroboration heuristic. While these students knew facts about the past, they did not approach a document in the same manner as the trained historians in Wineburg's study.

Wineburg's research also reveals differences among teachers in approach to documents. A teacher's history degree, Wineburg notes, does not always result in a teacher thinking in a historical context. For example, he compared the historical understanding of a teacher with a physics degree with that of a teacher with a history degree. Both teachers read documents about the Lincoln-Douglas debates of 1858 and the issue of racism. The physics teacher demonstrated better historical understanding than the teacher with a history degree. Wineburg's findings confirm that academic preparation in history does not necessarily guarantee that a teacher will be able to think contextually and historically. In this instance, the teacher with a history degree was much more present-minded than his counterpart with a physics degree. Wineburg acknowledges the tentative nature of his findings; he explains, however, that this finding is not new to researchers who, in the early 1990s study *Findings on Learning to Teach*, found that undergraduate students often failed to acquire a deep understanding of the academic discipline in which they majored. If we expect our students to think historically, we need teachers who can direct them toward historical thinking and consequent understanding of history.

Historical Thinking and Domain-Specific Knowledge. In *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts*, Wineburg resoundingly supports domain-specific knowledge and ways of knowing. He rejects the idea of a monolithic model of thinking with a single set of skills, which transcends academic disciplines and thereby can be applied across the curriculum to different subjects. Wineburg strongly urges that history be taught in schools as a separate subject involving a particular way of thinking and knowing about social reality.

Wineburg's research emphasizes that knowledge of subject matter is central to teaching. Thus, an essential component of the preservice and inservice education of history teachers is teaching them "to comprehend and ponder the key ideas, events, concepts and interpretations of their discipline" (Wineburg 2001, 170). Wineburg demonstrates that historical thinking—whether directed to construction of contexts, critical analysis of documents in terms of contexts, or context-sensitive judgments of behavior—is enhanced by the quality and extent of the discipline-based "background knowledge" brought to the task (Wineburg 2001, 150).

Applying Historical Thinking to Reading and Interpreting Documents. Wineburg argues that the monitory reading strategy, with its emphasis on literal interpretation and comprehension, neglects the primary distinction of historical thinking, the use of the sourcing heuristic before beginning to read for comprehension. Literal comprehension of the words in a document is not enough. Students must understand the document as a source in a specific context. We can help students examine the source of a document, find an author's credentials, identify when a primary source was written (in most instances), and speculate about the intended audience.

Analysis guides that draw students' attention to the sourcing heuristic are helpful in initiating historical thinking (Nelson and Drake 2001, 160). Teachers can organize reading guides by five tasks: (1) identify the document, (2) analyze the document, (3) determine the historical context, (4) identify the vital theme and

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narrative of the document, (5) and indicate the relationship of the document to a discipline in the social sciences/social studies. Each task and its sub-tasks emphasize the sourcing heuristic, what historians do before reading for content comprehension; the corroboration heuristic, what historians do to relate one document to another document; contextualization, the way historians describe the time frame and local and national conditions at the time a document was created; and comparison, which historians use to describe conditions in other parts of the world at the time a document was created.

Teachers must carefully select documents that will engage their students in historical thinking. The teacher can introduce students to a wide array of primary sources that include such written texts as letters, excerpts of speeches, diaries, and ledgers as well as visual materials such as photographs, paintings, maps, political cartoons, charts, and graphs. Capacity to find age-appropriate primary sources that embellish historical thinking is an important attribute of the effective teacher.

Generally speaking, teachers use primary sources in one of two ways. Some teachers incorporate a primary source into studying a historical topic, often to verify for students that the information they have presented is correct. Other teachers provide students with multiple primary sources to allow them to discover for themselves what the teachers and historians already know. This second way is more complex because a variety of sources are brought to bear on a topic in the classroom. We should not reject either approach. There is, however, a third way to use primary sources.

This third approach is designed around *first-order*, *second-order*, and *third-order* documents. This third way of using primary sources engages students in deliberative discussions beginning with a seminal document.

The teacher initially discusses the seminal (first order) document with students and asks them to suspend judgments about the past while trying to understand the context of the document. So students have a richer contextual understanding of the time period they are studying, the teacher then introduces additional documents that relate to the first order document (second order). Students are then invited to find documents on their own that pertain to their inquiry about a topic in history (third order). The third order documents that students bring to the discussions allow the teacher to assess students' dispositions and capacities to engage in historical inquiry. The assessment that takes place during the third-order deliberation intertwines deliberative discussions with the process of historical inquiry. To assist teachers and students in historical thinking, teachers can use primary source guides that are linked to Wineburg's sourcing heuristic and corroboration heuristic (see Nelson and Drake 2001, 159-160, for examples of these guides).

Using Internet Resources. The National Archives and Records Administration provides a starting point for teachers in the use of document analysis guides for written documents, photographs, political cartoons, posters, maps, artifacts, sound recordings, and motion pictures:

<http://www.nara.gov/education/teaching/analysis/analysis.html>

Many Web sites, including the following two, provide documents in American history:

<http://www.xs4all.nl/~swanson/history/chapter03.html>
<http://kuhttp.cc.ukans.edu/carrie/docs/amdocs_index.html>

References and ERIC Resources. The following list of resources includes references used to prepare this Digest. The items followed by an ED number are available in microfiche and/or paper copies from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For information about prices, contact EDRS, 7420 Fullerton Road, Suite 110, Springfield, Virginia 22153-2852; telephone numbers are (703) 440-1400 and (800) 443-3742. Entries followed by an EJ number, annotated monthly in CURRENT INDEX TO JOURNALS IN EDUCATION (CIJE), are not available through EDRS. However, they can be located in the journal section of most larger libraries by using the bibliographic information provided, requested through Interlibrary Loan, or ordered from commercial reprint services.

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This project has been funded at least in part with Federal funds from the U.S. Department of Education under contract number ED-99-CO-0016. The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. Department of Education nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government. ERIC Digests are in the public domain and may be freely reproduced and disseminated.

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